

CHAPTER 1

Locked in a Colonial Hinterland, 1851-1884

The title of this chapter is derived from how historian Carlos Schwantes has described the Pacific Northwest, as a region that has supplied raw materials for a national and international market controlled by investment capital located hundreds or thousands of miles away from it. Residents rarely, if ever, derive the full value from foodstuffs, wood products, and minerals produced in the region since there is so little manufacturing in the Pacific Northwest, nor are there retail outlets to match those of the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles Basin, East Asia, Europe, or the eastern seaboard of North America.¹ Josephine County, more especially the area around Oregon Caves, occupies a marginal place within the larger region. The county, with only one urban center in Grants Pass, has usually held one of the bottom few places among the 36 Oregon counties in measures of per capita income. Although primary production in the form of logging, farming, and mining still plays a role in its economy, Josephine County has become largely dependent on the service sector. That sector (which includes tourism, health care, and education) largely relies on government funding. There are some transfer payments in the form of income generated outside of the county through proceeds from investments, but also welfare payments of various kinds.

Initial reliance on primary (generally extractive) means of production for an economic base during the last half of the nineteenth century came about as Josephine County underwent a dramatic

and fairly rapid transformation after initial contact between indigenous Indians and white settlers in 1851. White Americans did not know of Oregon Caves and its immediate surroundings until Elijah Davidson's visit there in 1874, but transformation was well underway in the upper Applegate Basin and Illinois Valley (the two areas considered nearest to the future national monument for purposes of this study) by that time. What makes this vicinity and Josephine County unusual within the larger regional context is the absence of the usual precursors to physical transformation—a neat linear progression consisting of exploration, the fur trade, and linkage to the outside by emigrant trails. The process of settlement in southwest Oregon literally began with the first gold discovery in 1851. This chapter will thus emphasize how mining triggered physical changes on the land in what became Josephine County, especially within the Illinois Valley located west of Oregon Caves and along Williams Creek to the northeast.

Miners were soon joined by farmers who grew crops and reared livestock for both a local market (at least initially) and ones reached via pack trains going to Crescent City, California, where animals could be shipped by sea. Reaching distant markets by transporting commodities over difficult terrain slowed the pace of land clearance and other changes associated with farming, as did a precipitous decline in gold production once the richest placer deposits had been extracted. These factors are reflected in the drop of Josephine County's human population from 1,623 in 1860 to only 1,123 fifteen years later.² Mining increased the turbidity of streams and thus damaged fish runs even before the advent of hydraulic mining in the 1880s, but they also depleted deer and elk populations by hunting to supplement what they could purchase from nearby farmers. Grazing animals and crops displaced native grasses, but they also reduced the supply of camas and acorns found on bottom land suitable for agriculture. This led to conflict with local Indians who saw these staples as crucial to their diet, and by 1856, most of the indigenous peoples had been removed from southwest Oregon.³

Exploration and westward expansion, 1827-1851

Regional histories of the Pacific Northwest and their more local derivatives typically follow a chronological format that begins with a discussion (however cursory), of Indian peoples prior to contact

with white Americans, which is often derived from ethnological and/or archeological evidence. After this "prehistory" is the European and American exploration by sea and land prior to settlement, then some detail about the fur trade, along with Christian missionary activity among the Indians. The narrative usually expands with overland migration by white Americans in the 1840s, then continues its linear march by elaborating on settler encounters with Indians, organization of government as part of incorporation into the larger nation state, so that the frontier period concludes sometime around 1890 with discussion of how primary economic activity forged a distinct society within the often strangely delineated political boundaries. In the colonial hinterland around Oregon Caves and that of Josephine County, however, any such linear progression has been truncated, starting with how Indian removal severely limited the amount of ethnohistorical information that could be collected during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Early explorers bypassed the area, as did fur traders, missionaries, and those settlers crossing the continent overland in the 1840s. Miners on Josephine Creek made the first contact with Indians in 1851 and were followed by farmers who began to secure donation land claims less than two years later. Formation of Josephine County as a distinct governmental entity came in 1856, when it split from adjoining (and always more populous) Jackson County.

Exploration of a sort began with a party of Hudson's Bay Company trappers led by Peter Skene Ogden in the late winter of 1827. Ogden departed Fort Vancouver the previous year to implement the company's plan to create a vast fur "desert" devoid of beaver in order to hamper American competition in the fur trade throughout the Pacific Northwest. After going south to the Klamath Basin and toward Mount Shasta, Ogden continued west along the Klamath River and over the crest of the Siskiyou Mountains. He and his group passed along Bear Creek in the Rogue River drainage and traveled to Onion Creek's confluence with the Applegate River (near where the town of Murphy subsequently developed) and then into the middle portion of this watershed. They made camp near the spot where Thompson Creek flows into the river (close to what is now the community of Applegate) but Ogden and his companions furnished almost no description of what they saw, though their leader noted the scarcity of beaver.⁴

Of the early Hudson's Bay Company forays into southern Oregon, Odgen's party came nearest to either the Illinois Valley or the vicinity of Williams. Their characterization of the Applegate Valley as a place ill-suited to trapping beaver left much of what later became Josephine County as a *terra incognita* for the following two decades. This is largely due to its location away from a Hudson Bay Company "trail" that connected the Willamette Valley with the Sacramento River. The "trail" route (which made use of a network of faint traces made by Indians during trade activities) went through the Rogue River Valley in what later became Jackson County, but getting no closer than the area surrounding the future Grants Pass. Travelers like Ewing Young, who in 1834 brought cattle north from the Sacramento Valley to settlers occupying parts of the Willamette Valley, kept fairly close to the Hudson Bay trail. So did a party dispatched from the United States Exploring (Wilkes) Expedition who sought the most practical inland route from Oregon to California in 1841.⁵

In no case could the north-south travel "corridor" be described as a major artery for settlers or commerce, even when a part of the Southern Emigrant Route (Applegate Trail) began running through the same portion in what later became Jackson and Josephine counties in 1846. The California Gold Rush that commenced two years later spurred the building of a rough wagon road to move Willamette Valley grain southward to a suddenly lucrative market. It also helped to move newly arrived Americans who had previously come to Oregon by sea or overland, but then sought their fortunes in California as "Argonauts." Few of these emigrants saw the Rogue Valley and southern Oregon as a place to settle, at least initially, since the goldfields of 1848 and 1849 lay no closer than Sutter's Fort on the American River near Sacramento or in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Not until 1850, when prospectors found gold in the Klamath River drainage, and then the following year further north near what became Jacksonville, did the wagon road really begin to bring large-scale changes to the Rogue Valley and outlying areas.

Cultural collision and its consequences, 1852-1856

Within the area of southwest Oregon and northwest California dominated by the Klamath Mountains, the first five years of contact between white miners and the indigenous population quickly

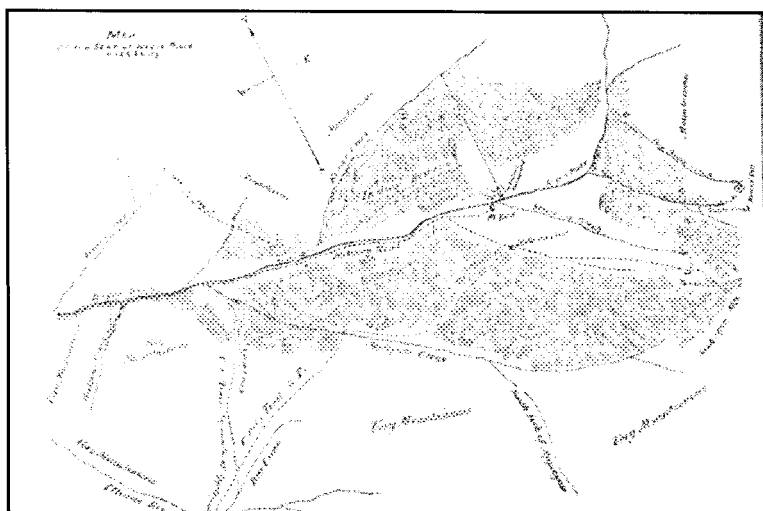


FIGURE 6. Sketch depicting theater of war in the Rogue and Illinois basins, c. 1857. (Courtesy of the Josephine County Historical Society.)

degenerated into chaos. Although sometimes flavored by murder and depredations on both sides, most of the recorded atrocities that took place during this period occurred outside the area of Oregon Caves.⁶ One battle, however, was fought on the Applegate River at Murphy Creek in January 1856, and then followed by another at Eight Dollar Mountain in the Illinois Valley two months later. In all probability more devastating, at least from the Indian point of view, and proceeding armed warfare, were the small pox outbreaks. The first swept south from seafarers by way of the Columbia River during the 1780s, with more pestilence of shorter duration coming north from the California coast in 1837-38.⁷

The available evidence indicates that Indians living in what became Josephine County numbered considerably fewer than those of the Rogue Valley in Jackson County at the time of contact with white settlers. What might have been the case before that time is purely conjecture, as the archival records rarely yield even a little information about the linguistic or cultural affiliation of the Indians that American settlers or others of European extraction encountered in the five years following 1851. At minimum, severe disruption to Indian lifeways resulted from five years of conflict in the Illinois Valley, upper Applegate drainage and along the Klamath River. By the end of 1856 many (if not most) of the

Indians from the valleys of the Rogue, Illinois, and Applegate rivers were forcibly removed from their homelands and then relocated on the central Oregon coast. Indians native to the Willamette Valley, previously decimated by diseases and then so overwhelmed by white settlers that they could not offer even token resistance, reluctantly joined their neighbors from southwest Oregon on a reservation that shrank dramatically over the ensuing decades. Some of the Takelma, Dakutebede (Athapaskans), and Shasta of southwest Oregon chose other forms of exile such as intermarriage with white miners or refuge among other Indians in California.

Native peoples situated along the lower reaches of the Klamath River, by contrast, were allowed to remain in scattered villages or "rancherias," even though the effects of war on them during the 1850s proved to be just as devastating. These settlements of Shasta, Karok, and Yurok persisted past the period of initial contact due to their remoteness, as it still required several days travel in 1890 for a person in Happy Camp to reach Yreka or Grants Pass. In addition, Indians living along the Klamath River were supposed to be more numerous than those in the Illinois Valley or upper Applegate even in aboriginal times.⁸ Indigenous inhabitants of the lower Klamath could thus inform ethnohistorical work on native lifeways throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ethnographers and linguists seeking similar insights to aboriginal southwest Oregon labored under more severe, if not crippling, handicaps due to their few consultants suffering extended and usually permanent geographic displacement.⁹

The tragic plight of indigenous peoples who were removed from southwest Oregon in 1856 should be understood at three levels. First is the national context, where efforts to clear lands of Indian title in the southeastern United States and old Northwest culminated in a formal government policy by 1830 of removing tribes. Congress passed legislation that year to establish districts west of the Mississippi River from which Indian title had been removed, and to exchange those tracts for Indian-held lands in the eastern states. Its "success" was reflected in the fact that over the next decade most of the indigenous people within the boundaries of the United States found themselves west of the Mississippi, such that the bulk of relocated Indians settled in what policy makers called a "permanent" frontier along the western border of Missouri and Arkansas. Further westward expansion meant modi-

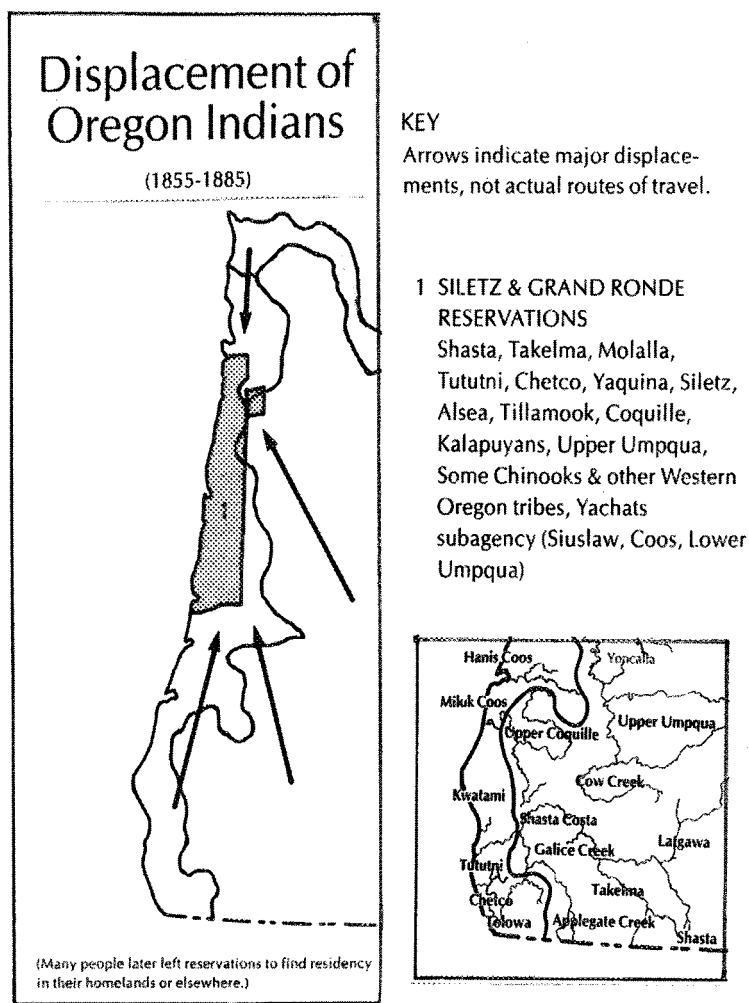


FIGURE 7. Displacement of Southwest Oregon Indians. The diagram at left depicts the location of the Siletz and Grand Ronde reservations in relation to the generalized movement of peoples from their homelands. Names of aboriginal groups and their approximate ancestral territories are highlighted at right for southwestern Oregon. Derived from Jeff Zucker, et al. *Oregon Indians: Culture, History and Current Affairs* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1989), 92.

fying the idea of Indian frontier, to where Indians might be concentrated on small reservations of land made for them. This “reservation system” was envisioned to be temporary, with government aid to Indians intended only for a limited period, until those

on reservations could support and assimilate themselves into mainstream society.¹⁰

What took place during the 1850s in southwest Oregon manifested both ideas. An act of Congress dated June 5, 1850, directed an appointed Indian agent to negotiate treaties as part of purchasing Indian lands in western Oregon.¹¹ The government's intent was to remove indigenous peoples in western Oregon to lands located east of the Cascade Range, but Indians refused to go (they preferred smaller reservations in their own territory instead) so the 19 treaties negotiated by the Indian agent in 1851 remained unratified by the United States Senate. This state of affairs led to appointment of a new Indian "commissioner" for the Oregon Territory in 1853, a person invested with considerable latitude in treaty making. Joel Palmer negotiated treaties in southwest Oregon even before his authorization by Congress to do so. But these treaties were subsequently ratified, thus legitimizing cessions made by groups such as the "Rogue River" (Takelma) and the "Shasta Costas" (Athapaskan).¹² Only the Takelma received a "temporary" reservation of roughly 100 square miles, one that lay between Evans Creek and the Rogue River, though it lasted only until the end of open hostilities between Indians and whites in 1856. By that time Palmer had developed a plan for mass removal to a coastal reservation, one that the military carried out that spring and summer. This occurred despite the fact that Congress had failed to ratify a treaty negotiated by Palmer that covered an area lying between California and the Columbia River, one that included lands where the Siletz Indian Reservation had been created by executive order.¹³ A few indigenous people escaped the roundups and some bands remained in their coastal villages, but the Illinois Valley and upper Applegate had effectively been cleared of their native inhabitants.¹⁴

The dire reality of life in a new place constitutes the second level of consequences stemming from the removal policy, since the Siletz Reservation posed a stark challenge to the survival of both its inhabitants and their cultures. It originally encompassed more than 1.4 million acres, but was poorly suited for agriculture even if the Indians had wanted to become farmers or ranchers as the government intended. Most of the early attempts at agriculture were necessarily experimental, as no one knew which crops might succeed. Most failed, and with rapid depletion of game animals (as well as poor fishing) the human population plummeted. The

Takelma population, for example, declined from 590 in 1857 to 350 just a year later. Some Takelmas received annual annuities in food and clothing since Congress had ratified their treaty. This distinction made them slightly more fortunate than the majority of Indians on the reservation, people who had no ratified treaty and thus did not qualify for assistance. Many Indians tried to return to their home territories, but soldiers stationed at nearby forts were ordered to bring them back.¹⁵

For those who continued to live on the reservation, it meant a mandatory amalgamation of all western Oregon Indians. Children were forced to attend school, where they could not speak their native languages or engage in traditional practices. Reductions in the size of the Siletz Reservation accompanied these barriers to cultural transmission. Congress chopped it to some 225,000 acres in 1875 once individual Indians received allotments of land.¹⁶ By 1900 just 483 people remained on the Siletz Reservation which lost another 190,000 acres in 1894, so it is not surprising that the total number of Takelma-speaking informants on which anthropologists of the time could base their work consisted of just three or four older women.¹⁷

The Takelma and their Athapaskan-speaking neighbors were shattered by a sequence of warfare, removal, and life on a distant reservation—all in the space of perhaps two decades. It is worth asking what might have happened had they been allowed to return to their homelands as more than marginalized victims of conquest.¹⁸ The idea of “contested space” provides a third level with which to understand this collision of cultures. The rush by miners during the early 1850s to the Illinois Valley, upper Applegate drainage, and the lower basin of the Klamath River Basin for placer gold came with impacts in the form of increased turbidity, sedimentation, and bed alteration in the streams. Indians certainly would have noticed the devastating effects of mining on the numbers of anadromous fish, particularly the fall runs of chinook and coho salmon.¹⁹ Game such as deer and elk disappeared where gold could be extracted in sufficient quantity to create centers of mining activity like Waldo and Althouse. The advent of farming as early as 1853 in places like the Illinois Valley constituted something of a double whammy to native peoples. Even if agriculture was restricted to a smaller area than mining, it corresponded to land that Indians used to collect seeds, acorns, and camas bulbs. Clearing oaks and plowing grass meadows filled

with camas deprived Indians of these food sources, as did the swine that white settlers raised on their land claims.²⁰

Consequently, the prospects for the peaceful co-existence of two drastically different lifeways (or systems of survival), at least during the 1850s, were virtually nonexistent.

Social and economic transition

Although mining could certainly be disruptive to fish runs and riparian areas in general, environmental impacts dating from the 1850s are difficult to assess a century and a half later. The gold discoveries made in the Illinois Valley during the first half of that decade are probably more significant in contributing to the rapid removal of Indians from the region, as well as the political organization of southern Oregon, than as a lasting economic contribution or type of land tenure. After some prospecting on the Klamath River in 1850 and 1851, white miners headed toward the Illinois Valley from the Happy Camp vicinity. They found gold in Josephine Creek and Canyon Creek, then made additional strikes by the spring of 1852 so that mining activity centered on areas such as lower Sucker Creek, the East Fork of the Illinois River, and Althouse Creek. Over the following year an estimated one thousand miners worked on ten miles along Althouse Creek, so that a town called Waldo formed and became something of a rival to another town in the Rogue Valley known as Jacksonville.

The sudden surge in southern Oregon's white population brought by mining activity led to the creation of Jackson County in 1852.²¹ It included all of the Rogue, Applegate, and Illinois valleys, so further partition occurred in early 1856 as more miners came to the vicinity of Waldo. At that point the territorial legislature created a new county comprised of largely mountainous terrain which amounted to roughly two fifths (1,625 square miles) of what had been Jackson County. Josephine County is somewhat unique among Oregon counties in being named for a woman, though Josephine Rollins ultimately made her permanent residence in California. As daughter of the man who found gold on a creek located west of Kerby in 1851, Rollins had little choice but to follow her parents to Yreka when Indians attacked soon after the discovery.²²

She did not return to the Illinois Valley, like so many miners had who called Josephine County home for short periods during

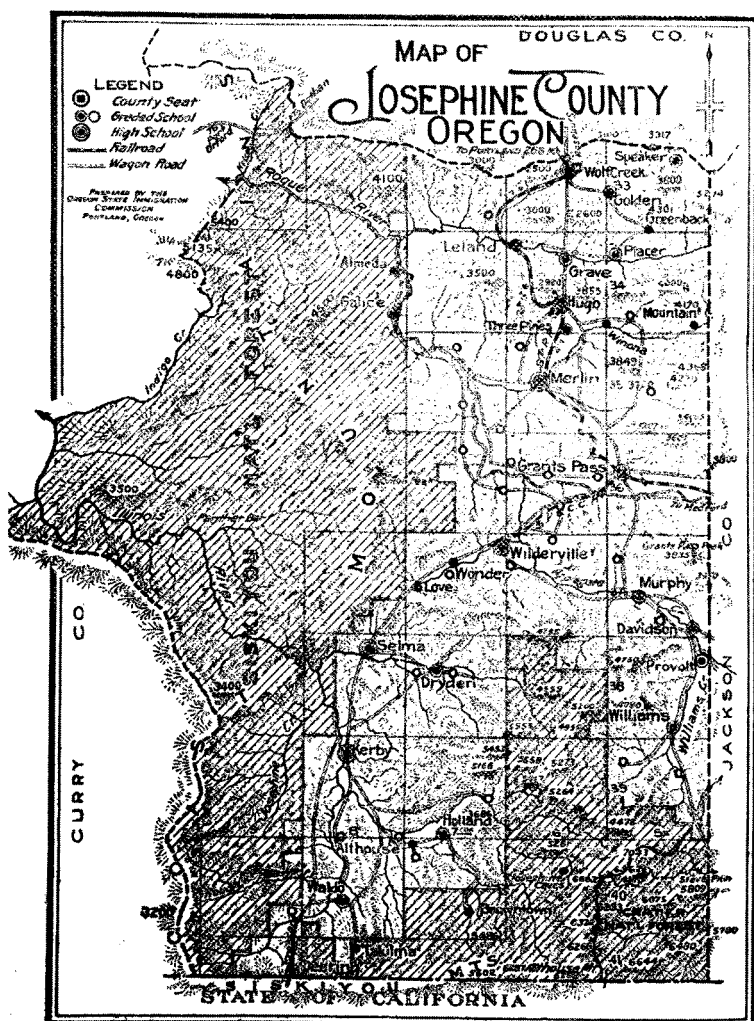


FIGURE 8. Map of Josephine County by the Oregon Immigration Commission, about 1910.

the 1850s. Unlike the Rollins family, however, most gold seekers tended to move toward the most lucrative diggings regardless of Indian troubles. As a group their origins were multi-national, with Chinese miners the largest foreign contingent in 1858, a year when they comprised roughly a quarter of the county's population according to census figures.²³ Over the previous decade the number of miners working at any one time in the county fluctuated greatly, depending upon any number of factors.²⁴ Some literally "floated" between Oregon and California prior to surveyors locat-

ing a boundary line on the ground in 1854, voting in both places and paying taxes in neither.²⁵

All of the mining in Josephine County and elsewhere in southern Oregon during the 1850s can be described as *placer*, that is, aimed at deposits held in suspension by sand or gravel laid down by rivers (and sometimes glaciers). This is different from lode mining, where embedded minerals such as gold are extracted from fissures or other gaps within surrounding rocks.²⁶ Most placer deposits, at least in Josephine County, have been located in riparian areas or along river terraces, usually at the lower elevations. Rich placer deposits within stream channels lasted only a few years, so that gold mining in southwest Oregon hit its peak during the first decade of settlement.²⁷

By the end of 1863 one observer described the vicinity of Waldo as "formerly very rich diggings, and some pay yet."²⁸ To place this statement in context, it is worth considering how the chronological development of mining technology is tied to the need for equipment and capital. The relatively simple placer technologies of panning and wooden boxes graduated in size (going from a rocker or cradle to a much larger Long Tom) allowed individuals and groups with relatively minimal capital to flock to places like Waldo and extract gold until the easily obtainable deposits had been exhausted. Larger cooperative ventures or corporate organization was needed for raising the money required for sluice boxes (essentially a bigger Long Tom that could extend hundreds of feet within a stream) and hydraulic mining. The latter method utilized special equipment and ditches to divert streams, in order for large quantities of water to be directed under high pressure to liquefy soil. Hydraulic mining could thus obliterate hillsides and had an obvious impact on streams and riparian areas. One investment company began building a ditch to divert water from the Illinois River's east fork in 1852 for work around Waldo, and remained in operation for another two years or so.²⁹

Accounting for less than a quarter of Josephine County's total gold production over the following century, lode (or "hard rock") mining is even more capital-intensive and specialized since it involves tunnels and other excavation. Prospectors located such a vein in the Althouse vicinity as early as 1861. After digging two tunnels, the company began crushing quartz and then extracted gold with an arrastra, so that the mine produced around \$25 per ton through much of the 1860s. Stamp mills being more efficient

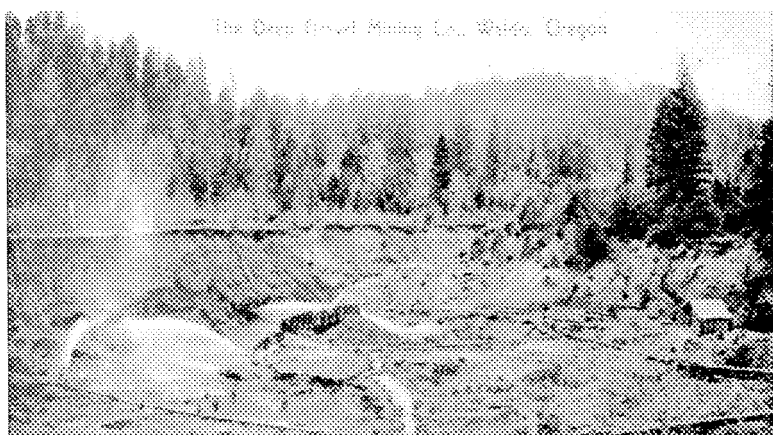


FIGURE 9. Early twentieth century hydraulic mining operation at Waldo. (Photo courtesy of the Josephine County Historical Society.)

(yet much more expensive), the new owners worked the vein with this method for a few months in 1875.³⁰ Fairly rich areas like Althouse allowed for different technologies to be used concurrently so that “a very large number of miners labored there with satisfactory results” for more than 15 years, according to one observer.³¹

Although the era of intensive mining persisted for another couple of decades, its contribution to the population of Josephine County began to wane by 1860. With the easily accessible placer deposits quickly exhausted, some miners headed north to the Fraser River in 1858, and from there to Colorado, Nevada, and eastern Oregon.³² Put into a national context, Oregon’s total production (in which Josephine County played an ever smaller role) never amounted to more than a tiny fraction of the total gold extracted from all western states during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³³ Without the boom stemming from low-tech placer mining, Josephine County’s population shriveled from 1,623 in 1860 to just 1,204 a decade later. Residents in the Illinois Valley continued to decline during the 1870s, but the county’s population surged upward to 2,400 in 1880. The number of people in Oregon, meanwhile, more than tripled during that period (going from 52,465 in 1860 to 174,768 in 1880) while residents of Jackson County also tripled from 3,736 in 1860.³⁴

In contrast to the fluctuations associated with mining, farming can be credited with helping to stabilize Josephine County’s population, at least to some degree, before the railroad connected it

with the Willamette Valley in 1884. Agriculture commenced in 1853, when crops and livestock arrived in the Illinois and Applegate districts, where miners previously had to rely on foodstuffs brought from Crescent City or the Willamette Valley. Most of the early agricultural settlement in Josephine County (this being from 1853 to 1855) resulted from entries made under the Donation Land Claim Act (DLCA) of 1850.³⁵ Mountain barriers and comparatively poorer soils furnish the main reasons why these claims amounted to considerably fewer in number than those which allocated most of the arable land in western Oregon's interior valleys—the Willamette, Umpqua, and the Bear Creek portion of the Rogue. For example, the Illinois Valley attracted just twenty-two entries for free land, with virtually all of these claims confined to the aforementioned "triangle." Only eight donation land claims could be found in that portion of the Applegate River that included Williams Creek, Missouri Flat, and the mouth of Murphy Creek.³⁶ Later settlers purchased public land directly in various ways, most commonly under the Homestead Act passed in 1862 or through laws that essentially legalized squatting.³⁷

Until 1880 a relatively small amount of viable farm land, as well as the inherent difficulties associated with reaching both of these areas in the absence of a railroad or major wagon road, limited the number of donation land claims and property acquired by any other means. Farmers experienced no difficulties in selling their produce and meat locally when placer mining boomed during the 1850s, but the contraction which followed made them more dependent on access to outside markets. The most lucrative gateway for such intra- or interregional export proved to be Crescent City since it offered access to San Francisco by sea. Crescent City could only be reached by pack trail from southwest Oregon until 1857, when a slightly wider wagon road connected Jacksonville to the coast by way of the Applegate Valley, Kerby, Waldo, and the Smith River.³⁸ Stages and supply wagons also served farmers and merchants located in the Illinois and Applegate drainages, whether they originated from Crescent City or connected at Jacksonville with the north-south route that linked Portland with Sacramento.³⁹ The costs associated with this access during the early 1880s were probably the reason why farms in the Illinois Valley (and, by extension, the Applegate drainage) commanded only one half the price of agricultural properties situated in the main Rogue Valley corridor.⁴⁰



FIGURE 10. An early view of Kerby with Eight Dollar Mountain in the background. (Photo courtesy of the Josephine County Historical Society.)

One account published in 1884 described the Illinois Valley as having drifted into decay after the miners began to abandon their placer claims more than two decades earlier.⁴¹ Many of the Chinese miners left to work on building railroads by the early 1880s, taking with them much of the demand for hogs. Farmers who remained grew some crops and ran a few cattle for a basic livelihood that meant bare subsistence in some cases. They hunted, just as the miners had for bears and deer (elk had become scarce by the 1870s), partly to supplement their food supply in addition to reducing threats to livestock.⁴² Many farmers became miners in the winter as a way to join the cash economy (gold being convertible to hard currency) and in so doing, brought some measure of stability to a valley containing only a couple of sleepy hamlets.⁴³

Discovery of the Oregon Caves, 1874-1884

The same pattern of a boom fueled by placer mines and then slow decline unfolded around Williams, as it had in the Illinois Valley. Gold discoveries in 1859 led to establishment of Williamsburg (the suffix was eventually dropped) which boasted a post office in 1860 and where 6,000 people supposedly resided two years later.⁴⁴ Placer deposits played out fairly quickly, but Williams qualified as a mining district, at least according to one source, based on having both hydraulic and quartz mines in 1897.⁴⁵ Just as it had else-

where in Josephine County, mining persisted but lost its central position in the local economy of Williams by the end of the Civil War. A few residents could survive along Williams Creek, making their basic livelihood during the growing season on donation land or a homestead, but they had to spend at least a portion of the wet winter months at their mining claims a short distance away.⁴⁶

Most had come to the Williams vicinity by way of the Willamette Valley or California, but they originated from Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, or Missouri—and in most cases being only a generation removed from an earlier trans-Appalachian frontier.

Elijah Jones Davidson is representative of both the settlement pattern on Williams Creek and that of other areas in the American West. He was part of a group celebrated by many nineteenth and early twentieth century historians, one who penetrated the unexplored wilds, waging battle with the forces of nature to impose their will on the land. Feted for their self-reliance and emphasis on individual freedom, these “pioneers” embodied the reasons as to why Americans thought they could be considered exceptional, since Davidson and his neighbors were at the forefront of a quickly unfolding settlement wave across the continent.⁴⁷ More recently some historians see this group of pioneers as derivative from one of four British folkways that imprinted a specific cultural pattern on the upland (or “mountain”) south, as distinct from the tidewater or piedmont regions. Davidson belonged to a group sometimes labeled the “Scotch-Irish,” one often characterized by being restless, land-hungry, and having an acceptance of settling sparsely populated areas where their crops and livestock could be located some distance from their neighbors.⁴⁸

Although born in Illinois, Davidson (1849-1927) came to Oregon as an infant in a wagon by way of the overland route. After spending several years trying to farm donation land in what later became southeast Portland (the Laurelhurst Lake vicinity), Davidson’s parents settled in Polk County near Monmouth by 1855. They then went south to Williams Creek in 1866 for unknown reasons, though Davidson’s father probably went to join a cousin there who filed for a donation land claim in the Applegate Valley as far back as 1854.⁴⁹ Elijah married in 1870 and lived around Williams at the time he discovered the Oregon Caves, though he and his wife later moved to Crescent City, and then Bandon, on the Oregon coast. The Davidsons even went to

Nome, Alaska, for several years before returning to buy a farm at Missouri Flat, near Provolt, on the Applegate River.⁵⁰

In the generally accepted version of the cave's discovery, an account written almost fifty years later by Davidson, he described a hunting trip into the Siskiyou Mountains starting from Williams. It began with five other men, yet after one night's camp in the "meadows" on Grayback Mountain, the group split up and each member hunted alone.⁵¹ The only contemporary account, one by Williams resident William W. Fidler, was written in 1877 to document exploration of the cave, but not published until 1887. Fidler simply credited Davidson with accidental discovery while pursuing a wounded deer in company with his dog.⁵² Davidson, however, included a bear whose appearance shifted the focus of his hunt and thus became central to the first-person narrative. It concluded with some ingenuity on Davidson's part, in that he placed the dead deer in front of the cave, thereby luring the bear outside with a meal. Davidson could thus return the following day to bag the bruin while it slept after consuming much of the deer carcass.⁵³ The only divergent account, albeit in a conversation record from the NPS management assistant at Oregon Caves in 1970, summarized the main points given by a Yurok Indian who claimed her grandfather guided the Davidson party. She recalled that William Norris, Sr., one of Davidson's neighbors, helped the party track a bear with dogs. Having chased their quarry inside the cave, three men and a dog entered and eventually killed the bear.⁵⁴

Even if there are some discrepancies concerning the discovery, it is worth noting that the emphasis placed on the priority assigned to Davidson has persisted. Although credited with discovery of the cave in published accounts of the 1880s, Davidson's importance magnified once Oregon Caves could be reached by automobile. A road from the Illinois Valley opened during the summer of 1922, the same year Davidson published his discovery narrative, and brought more visitors to the cave (10,000) than perhaps all previous years combined.⁵⁵ At that point Oregon Caves went from a curiosity reached only by mountain trail to a regional draw that attracted private investment capital, though it required a subsidy by way of government-funded additions to infrastructure. Davidson did not stand to benefit from changes brought by the road, though he did supply a promotional vehicle (no matter how the story of discovering the cave was told) that virtually all visitors could understand. Cave tours were already a scripted experience,



FIGURE 11. Elijah Davidson with his gun in Grants Pass, about 1926. (U.S. Forest Service, Siskiyou National Forest.)

in that rooms acquired names for purposes of orientation, while formations elicited comparisons with terrestrial creatures and objects even in 1877.⁵⁶ The discovery also provided a starting point for stories, often fanciful, though they served to reduce dissonance among visitors who associated a subterranean environment with gloom and melancholy. As a device for promotion, the Davidson narrative can be taken at face value, as another instance where a western wonder came to light through the lone frontiersman. It can also be appreciated symbolically, where the story's characters of hunter, dog, deer, and bear respectively pertain to male survival, loyalty, paradise, and the wild.⁵⁷

Only a small number of people visited for a decade after Davidson's discovery, with the few surviving accounts each repeating the same elements: disorienting travel through the cave, strangely beautiful formations of varying shapes and sizes, but also the taking of "specimens" as souvenirs.⁵⁸ In all probability these parties numbered fewer than ten, given the speed of travel by wagon to Williams and how relatively few people knew about the cave, much less possessed the means or desire to reach it. The absence of a wagon road or passable trail meant that prospective visitors needed to secure Davidson or one of his neighbors as a guide. These limitations effectively restricted touring parties to residents of Jacksonville, still the only town in southern Oregon where residents numbered more than five hundred.

In August 1884, however, a group led by Thomas Condon came from the University of Oregon in Eugene and stopped in Jacksonville on their way to the cave. Condon's lecture at a meeting hall on the geological structure of Oregon, one that outlined changes that took place over millions of years, paid for most of the travel expenses. He and several students continued by wagon to Davidson ranch near Williams, where the road ended, so that Carter Davidson (guide for several previous touring parties and brother of Elijah) could lead them to the cave. They used candles for illumination and noted how white the formations appeared, such that reflected light revealed "millions of sparkling diamonds." One participant mentioned obstacles in the form of slippery rocks, narrow passages, and low ceilings that hampered travel through even a portion of the cave, there being no ladders or other devices to assist visitors.⁵⁹

The prospects for easier access began to change less than a year later, some months after the railroad reached a small hamlet called Grants Pass on Christmas Eve of 1883. One of the Davidsons discussed the cave with Walter Burch, an acquaintance who began to explore the possibilities for a more direct route to it in November 1884. Now that Grants Pass possessed a rail connection from the north, Burch looked at how future visitors might approach what were then called the Josephine County Caves from the Illinois Valley. Instead of going over Grayback Mountain from Williams, he reasoned, a shorter and perhaps easier route might be blazed by way of Sucker Creek or one of its tributaries. Providing improved access with one or more trails was, however, contingent on Burch controlling the cave and land that surrounded it.⁶⁰